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BRUCE LAWLOR/PHOENIX  
BY ANDREA ZENIZ

Bruce Lawlor's role as a member of a CIA "extermination" force during the Vietnam War should not become an issue in the campaign for attorney general, his Democratic primary opponent said Friday.

"I don't think it's appropriate," William Pearson said.

Lawlor served as an advisor to the Phoenix team, which was responsible for combatting the influence the Viet Cong.

According to a published report Friday, Lawlor, quoted in a book about Vietnam, described Phoenix as "an extermination operation. There's no sense of trying to make a rose out of it."

But he said Friday the word neutralize was a better word than extermination to describe Phoenix.

"How do you define extermination?" he asked. "We were exterminating -- neutralizing -- the influence of the Viet Cong in South Vietnam."

Lawlor, a Democratic representative from Springfield, said he took offense to reports that his work for the Phoenix team made him an assassin.

"What has happened in this country is, people didn't like the war," he said. "We've been labeled as psychos, as baby killers, as torturers, as assassins."

"People who didn't like the war ... have failed to disconnect the war from the warrior."

And, Lawlor said, it is inaccurate to think of the Phoenix operation as an assassination program that overcame political opponents by killing them.

He said his primary objective was the arrest of Viet Cong for interrogation purposes.

"This is not a situation where you cut someone's throat in the middle of the night," he said.

Lawlor confirmed he had heard reports of torture by Americans, but never allowed anyone under his command to torture the enemy.

"There were atrocities Americans committed," he said. "All you can do is work like hell to prevent them."

Lawlor said torture was an integral part of the enemy's war plan, and Phoenix set up ambushes to kill armed Viet Cong patrols, which were responsible for slaying women and children.

"I'm not ashamed of anything I did in South Vietnam," he said. "It was a rotten, dirty job, but someone had to do it."